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Byzantine Time Swords (10th–11th Centuries) in Romania

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Keywords: *Early Middle Ages, Byzantine Sword, Sword-guard, Pommel, Varangians*

Abstract

The author points his attention to several published and unpublished swords and parts of swords of Byzantine time, discovered in Romania. Defining the kind of weapons by origin (manufacturing), or linking them to a certain ethnic group or army is largely conditional – each soldier had used an effective weaponry, whether it was made in a local workshop, produced in a workshop during a military campaign, or received as a gift or trophy. Thus, it is difficult to determine if some of the weapons mentioned in some studies (particularly swords), are definitely Byzantine, Arabic, Indian, etc.

The author gives new interpretation some already published Byzantine swords (from Sfintu Gheorge (Sepsiszentgyörgy), Covasna County and for a sword-guard and pommel of a sword found in the Păcuiul lui Soare fortress. For the sword from Sfintu Gheorge (Sepsiszentgyörgy), Covasna County, he proposes the hypothesis that it is of Byzantine origin, found in Bulgarian cemeteries dated from the second half of 9th – first years of 10th centuries. For the pommel from Păcuiul lui Soare fortress the author gives numerous parallels – all dated to the second half of 9th – 10th centuries.

Based on the fact that there are two quite similar in shape sword-guards: one from Păcuiul lui Soare fortress and another one from Pliska the author derived the conclusion that they belong to a new type of sword (or more precisely sword-guard). This type should be described as Byzantine and the name “Pliska (1948) type” has been suggested for it.

Giving a comment on four unpublished swords kept in two museums in Romania the author suggested that the sword from Giurgiu museum is also Byzantine and dated it to the 10th century, while the three others from Constanța museum are of Scandinavian origin. He believes, that the last ones would have reached the area close to the mouth of the Danube during the Varangian-Russian military and commercial raids to Constantinople from 9th to mid-11th centuries or due to the recruitment of Varangians and Normans (Engli/sh and Dani/sh too) by the Byzantine Empire in middle 11th century and later.

About weaponry of Middle Ages, from the territory of Romania and neighboring countries, it was marked that a lot of it was of Byzantine origin or was from the time of Byzantine influence in the Middle and Lower Danube¹. Objective analysis had been given in recent archaeological studies too that these finds could be also associated with the Avars, the Bulgarian Power up north of Danube River, and with

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¹ Horedt 1986, S. 97, 149, Abb. 62; Nicolle 1999, p. 38 (No 42). Kovács 1994–1995, S. 174, Abb. 7.

the movement of the Magyars to the Middle Danube River² or, last but not least, with the Varangians (Scandinavian mercenaries) in Byzantium's army³.

However, the main concern is to individuate the criteria able to determinate which kind of weaponry can be definite as Byzantine weaponry (the swords especially).

Here we should note that defining the kind of weapons by origin (manufacturing), or linking them to a certain ethnic group or army is largely conditional – each soldier had used an effective weaponry, whether it was made in a local workshop, produced in a workshop during a military campaign, or received as a gift or trophy⁴.

For the production of weapons in the Byzantine Empire there are only a few written sources that are discussed repeatedly. In Ceremonial book there are references about the manufacturing of arms in Constantinople⁵. The eminent specialist of the Byzantine weaponry, T. G. Kolias, also notes that the Empire was quickly to fit its technology to the best technical innovations of its enemies (often its neighbors)⁶. Thus, is difficult to determine if some of the weapons mentioned in separate studies, particularly swords, are Byzantine, Arabic, Indian, etc.⁷

I. Publishing Byzantine swords from Romania territory – new interpretation

1. The sword from Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy), Covasna County (fig. 1)

The sword was discovered in 1943 when a brickyard was built in the town. In a destroyed grave (at a depth of 50 cm) was found a skeleton located in the East – West, but it is unclear where the head was (presumably – to the West). In the pit of the grave was also found the skull of a horse. In addition there was found one spear-head (length – 14 cm) with sleeve (diameter 2 cm), one knife and other metal pieces. Z. Székely, who first published information from the find, dated the grave, and accordingly the sword, between the 5th–7th centuries⁸.

To my knowledge, the opinion of a Byzantine origin of this sword was first expressed by A. Kiss, who included it in a group of swords found in the Carpathians. A. Kiss briefly analyzed the characteristics of the funeral ritual, and noted that in the Carpathian region this was typical for 10th–11th centuries and connected it with the Magyars⁹.

The sword is 81,5 cm long (75,5 cm – blade; 6 cm – handle), maximum width of the handle – 2 cm. There is no trace of bone or wood on the handle. The sword-guard is bronze – a total of 11,5 cm.

² See the last in: Madgearu 2002–2003 (2005), pp. 41–65 and literatures; also: Țiplic 2006, pp. 44–47.

³ Popa 1984, S. 425–431.

⁴ Йотов 2004, с. 10.

⁵ De cer., 674, 3.

⁶ Kolias 1988, S. 27.

⁷ Ada Bruhn Hoffmeyer notes that many martial techniques and weapons – for example the use of the sword (saber) - especially come to Europe from Islamic world (*Hoffmeyer* 1961, 43). See also D. Nicolle commentary on the weapons from Shipwreck at Serçe Limani, Turkey (Nicolle 1999, p. 122, commentary from fig. 292: A-P).

⁸ Székely 1945, pp. 1–15; Idem 1948, pp. 61–64.

⁹ Kiss 1987, S. 199–202, 206–207, Abb. 7 (in note 80 A. Kiss offers gratitude to I. Bóna, who has declared similar opinion in “Die Geschichte Siebenbürgens” – manuscript of 1977).

In my opinion, A. Kiss' analysis can be corrected, mostly based on the studies of Z. Székely – which we are not in front of a single grave but of an entire necropolis. Indeed we do not possess data whether this necropolis was investigated and what the results were. The placing a skull of a horse is a characteristic from the 9th – 10th century of a funeral ritual common to Avars¹⁰, Proto-Bulgarians¹¹ and Magyars¹².

On the basis of the archaeological investigations, a few Romanian scholars directed their attention to the Bulgarian influence north of the Danube River¹³. Especially for Southern Carpathians, the Proto-Bulgarian archaeological culture is present, generally in two areas located in Southern and South-eastern Transylvania (the cultural group – Blandiana-A, also called Alba Iulia). The first area is around Alba Iulia (Balgrad) where are located several settlements and cemeteries in the city (the 1200 graves site of Stația de salvare II – Țiplic 2006, 75), the fortified settlement and necropolis of Blandiana, the settlement of Salnik (Câlnic) and necropolis of Sanbenedik and Sebeș. The second area is around Poiana, Černat, Sfântu Gheorghe, Covasna County, where settlements are located and according to my analysis – the necropolis, too¹⁴. I am not aware of early Hungarian necropolis in this area.

I would like to remind that it is object of discussion if the ethnic group Szekler (Szekel), who inhabits nowadays the territory between the rivers Mureș and Olt, is descendant of the Magyarized Turki people¹⁵.

The dimensions and characteristics of the sword (such as the width of the blade – around 6,5 cm) point to a dating from the second half of 9th to the beginning of 10th century.¹⁶

Thereby, I propose the hypothesis that the sword from Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy) in Covasna County is of Byzantine origin, found in Bulgarian cemeteries dated from the second half of 9th to the first years to 10th centuries¹⁷.

2-3. *Sword-guard and pommel of the sword found in Păcuiul lui Soare fortress.*

In the book for the fortress on the Danube island Păcuiul lui Soare have been published two pieces of swords for which I think that maybe a identification as Byzantine is highly probable. Both are broken, so the author S. Baraschi presented

¹⁰ Балинт 1995, с. 43–44.

¹¹ Аксенов, Тортика 2001, с. 199–200. Рашев 2008, с. 198.

¹² Bálint 1971, pp. 85–108 (http://epa.oszk.hu/01600/01609/00015/pdf/MFME_EPA01609_1971_2_085-108.pdf); Балинт 1972, с. 177–178.

¹³ Comșa 1960, pp. 395–422 and notes 14.

¹⁴ Madgearu 2001, 277; *Pinter* and collab. 2006, pp. 44–48; Țiplic 2006, 75–86; Székely 1972, pp. 125–128.

¹⁵ The question about the origin of the Szekler (Szekel) ethnic group is very difficult and it is out of our topic, Милетич, Агупа 1893, с. 272–273; Miklosich 1856, S. 105–146; <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/579333/Szekler>.

¹⁶ For one bad reconstruction (the blade is no correct; pommel is fiction) to the Sfântu Gheorghe sword see in: <http://www.myarmoury.com/talk/viewtopic.php?t=8927&highlight=>

¹⁷ Yotov 2011-a, in print.

them reconstructed. I think that they are correctly defined as: pommel (tip of the handle of a sword) and sword-guard¹⁸.

2. Pommel of the sword from Păcuilui lui Soare fortress (fig. 2-a)

The pommel from Păcuilui lui Soare fortress has many parallels. A good example of comparison is a very well preserved sword (fig. 2-b) found southwest of Lake of Balaton in Hungary: grave 55 in Garabonc-I necropolis, dated to the second half of 9th century. The author, B. M. Szőke defined this sword as Byzantine¹⁹.

Similar pieces, defined as pommels of a sword were found in Bulgaria: one in a 10th century dug-out in Abritus (near Razgrad, North-eastern Bulgaria) in a the Middle ages layer (fig. 2-c)²⁰, another one (fig. 2-d) in a 10th century layer in Pliska²¹, one (fig. 2-e) with numerous other weapons and equipments abandoned after the battle of Drastar in 1087²².

There is another one of similar shape and made of silver, dated to the 10th century with inscribed dedication to “The Prince Abi'l Ghanā'im Manşūr Billah”, now in the Rifaat Sheikh al-Ard Collection, Geneva (fig. 2-f)²³.

I known more pictorial parallels of this presented pommels, but I turn my attention especially to the Fresco of Joshua (10th century) from Hosios Loukas monastery in Boeotia, Greece (fig. 2-g)²⁴.

3. Sword-guard from Păcuilui lui Soare fortress

For the sword-guard is set a very close parallel found in the first capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom – Pliska²⁵.

There are a few attempts to define the types of described swords as Byzantine²⁶. In several articles I was able to define types of Byzantine swords. The main conclusion that I made regarding the methodology of determining the types is that especially for swords, and other stab-cutting weapons, the most often used attributed typological characteristics are related to the handle, the shape of the pommel and especially the sword-guard. In other words, the typology of swords is often “a typology of the sword-guards”²⁷.

¹⁸ Diaconu, Baraschi 1977, p. 137, Pl. XX-9, 11.

¹⁹ Szőke 1992, S. 92–96, taf. 18; 20 63; Szőke, 1994, S. 251–317 http://www.archeo.mta.hu/-hun/munkatars/szokebelamiklos/ZM_05_1994.pdf). The sword has been recently published in the impressive catalogue of RZGM (curator Falko Daim), Byzanz, Pracht und Alltag, 2010, p. 293.

²⁰ Дзанев 2007, с. 378, обр. 12. Found with small hoard of 11 solids, 10 belong to Constantin VII with Romanos (945–959) and one of Nicephorus II Phokas with Basil (963–969).

²¹ No published. I express my gratitude to Dr Janko Dimitrov for his permission to publish this find.

²² About the Drastar battle see: Yotov – 2008, p. 257–268.

²³ See: Nicolle 2002, pp. 162, fig. 27.

²⁴ Chatzidakis 1997, p. 16, fig. 5.

²⁵ Станчев 1955, с. 207, рис. 24.

²⁶ Dawson 2007, p. 28; Eger, 2011 (forthcoming). I would like to express my deeply thanks to Dr C. Eger for the information about his article.

²⁷ Yotov 2011-b, p. 115. Hungarian scholar B. Fehér also noted that the primary indication of their origin was the uniform style of their hilts. See: Fehér 2001, pp. 157–164, note 18.

Uniformity of the sword-guard from Păcuiul lui Soare fortress and sword-guard from Pliska rise to define a new type of sword (more precisely sword-guard), which can be described as Byzantine – the Pliska (1948) type²⁸.

II. No published swords

4. The sword from Giurgiu museum, found near Calarasi

The sword was found in Danube River near Calarasi in 1978. Dimensions: complete length 92 cm, length of the handle 10,5 cm.

In the inventory book and at the in the museum exhibition, the sword is defined as Byzantine and dated in the 9th–10th century (sabia Bizantina de sec. IX-X). It has been mentioned it was found in the waters of the Danube River. I would like to point out that the length and the width of the blade, has no fuller, which gave me a reason to agree with the opinion of the colleagues at Giurgiu museum, but I believe that it should be dated more precisely in 10th century.

5-7. Three Scandinavian swords in the Constanța museum

In the Middle ages section of the archaeological exhibition at the museum in Constanța there are presented three swords that are left outside attention of specialists²⁹.

One of them (fig. 5-a, b) was found nearby the village Albești (west of Mangalia), the others two (fig. 6–7) come from somewhere in the inland Dobrudja.

In European literature there are many archaeological studies of medieval swords classifications, but almost all are based on a study of J. Petersen from the early 20th century³⁰. In the absence of more information about finding place, swords from the museum in Constanța can also be identified and dated using the Norwegian scholar' scheme.

5. Sword from Albesti, west of Mangalia (fig. 5-a, b)

The sword from Albești has upon one side a stamp (fig. 5-c), and on the reverse side there is probably, the inscription “Ulfberht” (fig. 5-d). After J. Petersen's classification, it belong to the type V. J. Petersen placed this type in the earlier part of the 10th century³¹, but from the Balkans the dating is later, from the second half of 10th – to the early 11th centuries.

6. Sword of unidentified finding place (fig. 6)

Has preserved the tiny type pommel “D” shaped, the simple right sword-guard and the upper part of the blade with fullers.

²⁸ I am calling this type “Pliska (1948)” because in a special article I defined another type (Pliska 2005) based on three uniformity sword-guards, one found in Pliska in 2005. See: Yotov 2011, pp. 118–119.

²⁹ I would like to express many thanks to the colleagues from museum in Constanța – G. Costurea for permission, and V. Voinea for cooperation.

³⁰ Petersen 1919, pp. 158–166; Peirce 2002; Oakeshott 1960; Maure 1977, S. 95–116.

³¹ Petersen 1919, pp. 154–156, plate III.

After J. Petersen's classification, it belongs to the type X, dating from the second half of 10th to the early 11th centuries³². A few scholars think that the type X swords started a new typology at 11th – 12th centuries.

7. Sword of unidentified finding place (fig. 7)

The sword is preserved without pommel. Over the blade have good shown fullers.

The condition of sword allow us to compare it with the sword of type E or W of Petersen, dated at the turn of 9th – 10th centuries³³.

The main ways through which these artifacts of Scandinavian origin would reach the lands in the mouth of the Danube were the Varangian-Russian military and commercial raids to Constantinople from 9th to middle 11th centuries and the recruitment of Varangians and Normans (Engli/sh and Dani/sh too) by the Byzantine Empire in middle 11th century and later³⁴. Besides the Scandinavian mercenaries, i believe, some of the artifacts are connected with the Pechenegs who had direct commercial and military contacts with the Kiev State in 10th – early 11th centuries, and since 1050s were settled south of the Danube.

I hope that by remembering some published sword and parts of swords and publishing new swords, new attention can be drawn on other weapons kept in Romanian museums, maybe of Byzantine origin.

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³² Petersen 1919, pp. 158–167, figs. 124, 127, 128.

³³ Petersen 1919, pp. 156–157.

³⁴ Васильевский 1908. (http://annals.xlegio.ru/byzant/vasiljevsk/1_03.htm); Blöndal, Benedikz 1978.

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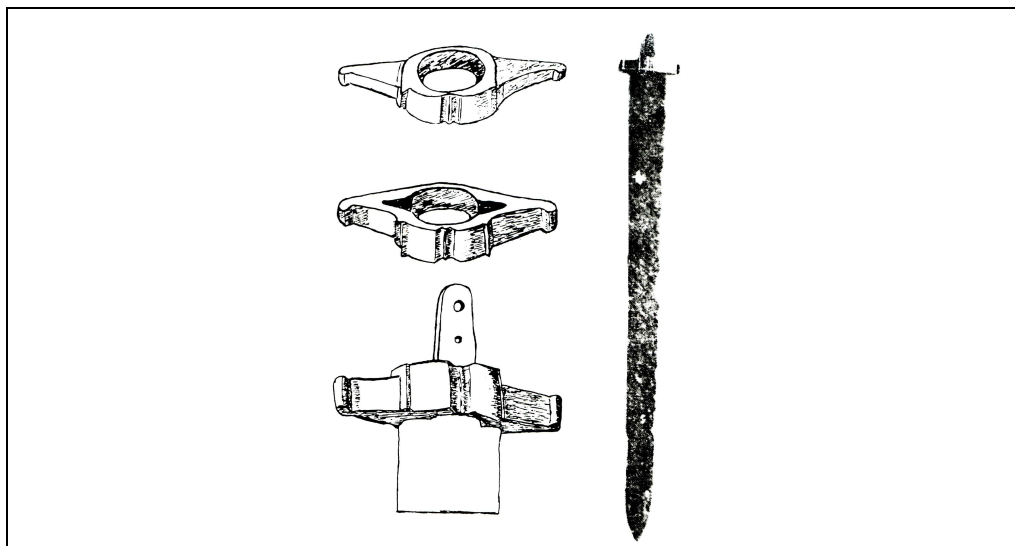


Fig. 1: Sword found in destroyed grave in Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy), Covasna county

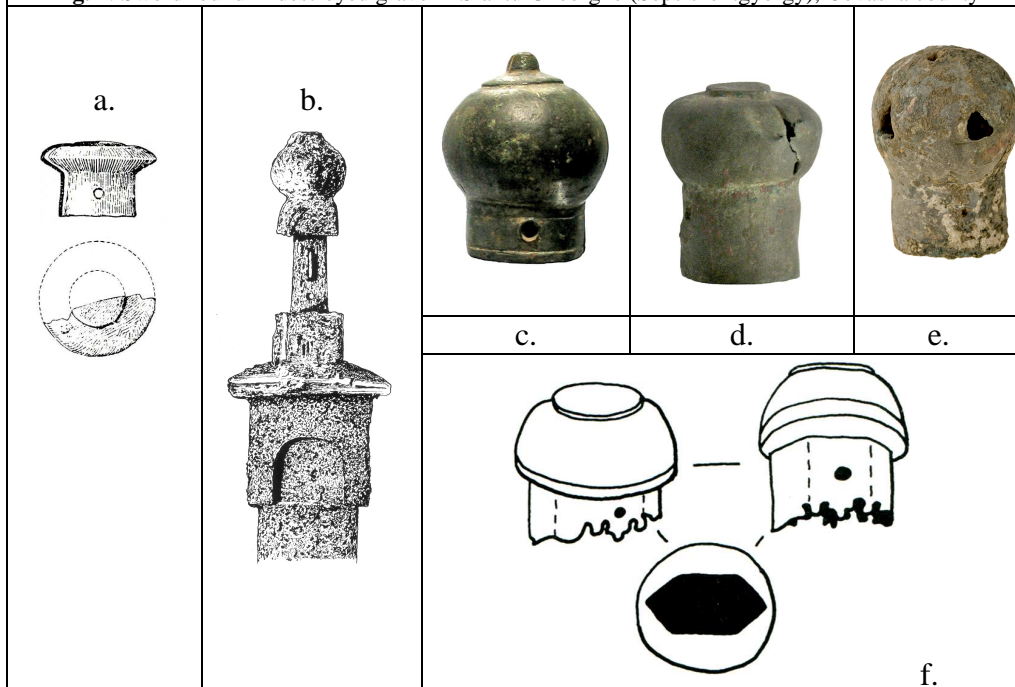


Fig. 2: a. Pommel of sword from Păcuil lui Soare fortress; b. Sword found in grave 55 in Garabonc-I necropolis, Hungary; c. Pommel of sword found in a 10th century dug-out in Abritus, Bulgaria; d. Pommel of sword from Pliska— first capital of First Bulgarian Kingdom; e. Pommel of sword found south of Silistra, with numerous other weapons and equipments abandoned after the battle of Drastar in 1087; f. Pommel of silver one of 10th century with inscribed dedication to “The Prince Abi'l Ghanā'im Manşūr Billah”

 <p>g(1).</p>	 <p>g(2).</p>
<p>Fig. 2: Similar shape of pommel of swords presented in frescoes: g(1). Fresco of Joshua (10th century) from Hosios Loukas Monastery in Boeotia, Greece; g(2). Fresco of Joshua (10th century) – detail</p>	
 <p>a.</p> <p>b.</p>	
<p>Fig. 3: a. Sword-guard from Păcuiul lui Soare fortress; b. Sword-guard from Pliska – first capital of First Bulgarian Kingdom</p>	<p>Fig. 4: Sword found in Danube River near Călărași (now in Giurgiu Museum)</p>

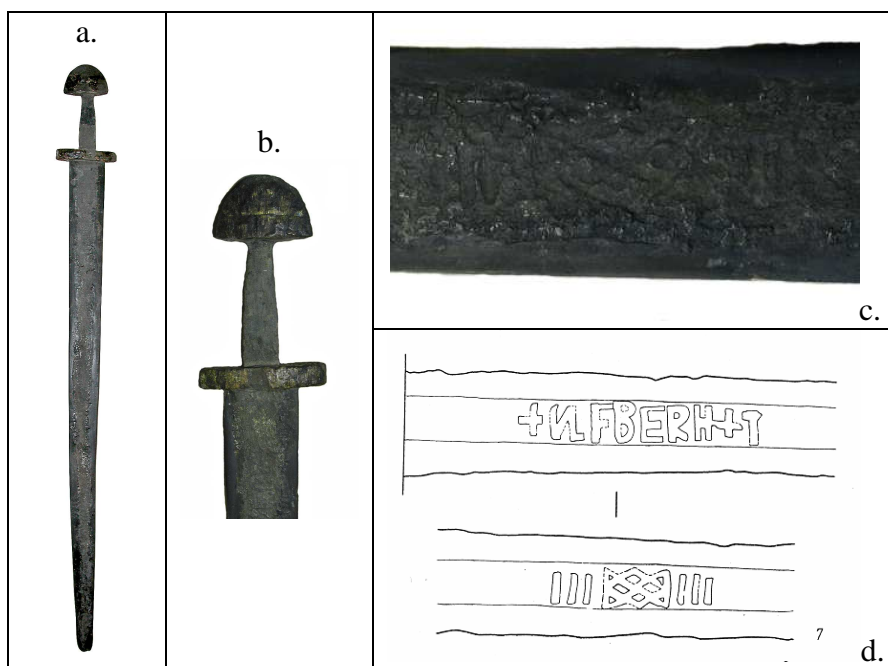


Fig. 5: a. Sword found in Albești (jud. Constanța); b. Upper part of sword from Albești; c. Sign stamped on one side of the sword from Albești; d. The possible sign of Ulfberht on the other side of Albești sword

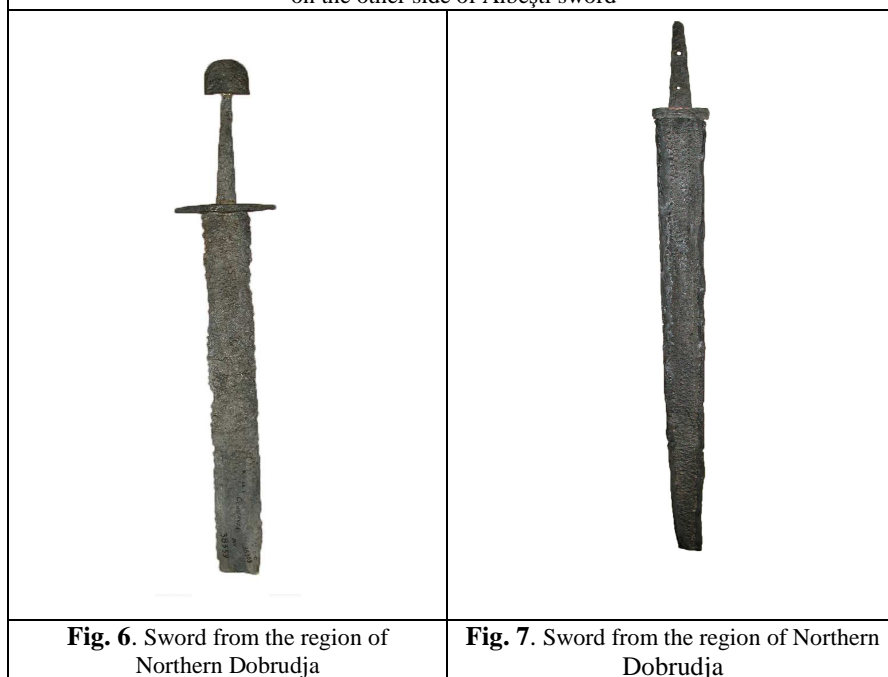


Fig. 6. Sword from the region of Northern Dobrudja

Fig. 7. Sword from the region of Northern Dobrudja